

## RQF and HET: Assassin and Corpse?

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I believe that the federal government's Research Quality Framework (hereafter RQF) poses a very serious threat to the survival of the history of economic thought in Australia. In this short note I set out the grounds for this belief, summarise the effects of the British government's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) on the status of HET in the United Kingdom, and outline some possible defensive reactions. This is a preliminary, tentative and (alas) pessimistic piece, intended to stimulate discussion—beginning, I hope, at the 2007 HETSA conference, if it is not already too late by then.

The broad outline of what is intended for the RQF is now in the public domain (DEST 2006), though the details are still being worked out. It is intended that the British RAE will be followed quite closely, which does at least make it possible to draw some firm conclusions about the likely impact on the history of economic thought, using the published evidence from the UK. Roger Backhouse has documented the decline in HET teaching since the introduction of the RAE in 1989 and the pressure (direct and indirect) on individuals not to do HET research on the grounds that it was unlikely to 'count' for RAE purposes. 'One respondent went so far as to say, "I have been told that my interest in HET is 'unhelpful' to my department's RAE effort" and that his teaching load had been increased and his research budget cut' (Backhouse 2002a, p. 86). The situation was likely to get worse, not better, as existing HET specialists retired and were not replaced; 80% of those surveyed were over 40, the mode being 50-60 (*ibid.*, p. 89). In sum:

HET has increasingly been pushed out of the leading economics departments. These pressures spread out to lower-ranked departments competing for a place among the elite. The age profile of HET staff raises the possibility that when the generation currently in its fifties retires, the number of staff available to teach the subject will plummet, and the subject will be in danger of dying out altogether. (*ibid.*, pp. 93-4)

Interestingly, more than half of Backhouse's respondents identified themselves as 'heterodox'. The adverse effects of the RAE on heterodox economics in the UK are well established (Harley and Lee 1997; Lee and Harley 1998). The 'rapid paradigmatic homogenization of economics' (Lee 2006a, p. 24) was further accentuated by the activities of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), which encouraged high-ranking economics departments to eliminate any vestiges of heterodoxy (including HET) from their undergraduate teaching.

I am not claiming that the RAE should take all the blame for the virtual disappearance of HET from the 'top' British universities; the writing was on the wall as early as the 1960s (Backhouse 2002b), and a similar outcome has been produced in the United States in an informal manner by the incestuously circular relationship between 'top' universities and 'top' journals (Lee 2006b). Roger Backhouse now regrets that his (2002a) assessment 'ended on a note that is more negative than I intended', and suggests that 'the flow of good PhDs in HET is not much different from what it ever was, and that they are mostly coming out of History departments, not economics, or perhaps philosophy' (Backhouse 2006). This is just as well, since in the *Economic Journal's* recent list of 156 dissertations

passed by British universities in 2004-5 and 2005-6, classified by topic, there is *not one* in HET (Anon. 2006).<sup>1</sup>

There are grounds for believing that the Australian RQF will be even more damaging, for the official documents appear to me to conceal two sub-texts, one quite close to the surface and the other buried a little deeper. The first is the clear intention to reintroduce the binary system into Australian higher education under the rubric of ‘diversity’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘student choice’. There will be a Serie A and a Serie B for universities, with only those in Serie A being significantly funded for research and expected to teach all disciplines, including physics and philosophy. No-one—probably not even the Minister herself—yet knows how many institutions will end up in Serie A and how many in Serie B, but it seems very likely that once the new system is in place promotion (and relegation?) will prove extremely difficult, if not impossible. The Group of Eight will certainly be in Serie A, along with the University of Tasmania (if only for political reasons). Some, though possibly not all, of the self-proclaimed Innovative Research Universities will be there too.<sup>2</sup> After that, who knows?

The second sub-text is more sinister, at least from the perspective of this unreconstructed social democrat. It is the encouragement of for-profit private providers in competition with the public sector, and the replacement of the present system of university financing by a student voucher scheme. Taken together, these measures would replace central planning with a genuine higher education market, which is appealing to the present federal government on both ideological and cost-reduction grounds. The recent introduction of vouchers for adult vocational training, redeemable in TAFE and private colleges alike, is a significant straw in the wind, as is minister Bronwyn Bishop’s enthusiastic support for the ‘University’ of Phoenix. In Britain, where university accreditation is a national responsibility, the American education company Kaplan is ‘planning to become the UK’s first for-profit university, taking advantage of the government’s relaxing of the law on degree-awarding powers’ (MacLeod 2006). It can expect an enthusiastic welcome in Australia, where Canberra will have been asking itself why almost 50% of secondary students in Australia now go private, but less than 0.5% of tertiary students. The answer is simple. Under the constitution the accreditation of universities is a state matter, and up to now the states have insisted that no institution can call itself a university, and award degrees, unless it teaches a wide range of subjects (normally including physics and philosophy) and conducts research in most of them.<sup>3</sup> This has made the market unappealing to private providers.

What is the relevance of the RQF to all this? The answer is simple. The public institutions in Serie B will retain both their names and the right to award degrees, even without physics, philosophy or much in the way of funding for research. Can you imagine the Victorian government, for example, withdrawing the title of ‘University’ from Ballarat, Deakin, RMIT, Swinburne, VU and—*horribilis dictu*—La Trobe, and informing these institutions that from now on their graduates must be awarded diplomas and certificates, not degrees? But then the ‘level playing field’ principle of National Competition Policy can be invoked by would-be private providers, and in the final analysis it will be enforced by the courts. ‘We don’t do very much by way of research, but neither do they. Where’s the difference?’ They, too, will be able to call themselves ‘Universities’ and to award degrees.

This will affect HET in three ways. First, a significant proportion of HETSA’s academic members work for institutions that will almost certainly find

themselves in Serie B under the RQF, with little or no research funding, increased teaching loads and inexorable competitive pressure from the new private providers.<sup>4</sup> Their scholarly output can only decline in consequence.

Second, the criteria for assessing the quality of research under the RQF will effectively eliminate HET from consideration. If UK practice is followed in economics, only journal articles will qualify, not books or book chapters; it even was suggested, only half-jokingly, that books should carry a *negative* weight in the RAE (Backhouse 2002b, p. 120). And only articles in 'quality' journals will count.<sup>5</sup> The Diamond list will probably not be influential in Australia; it would set the bar much too high, even for the Group of Eight (Lee 2006a). One document that has been circulating is based on ISI citations and lists the top 175 journals in economics, ranked by 'total cites' and by 'impact factor'<sup>6</sup>. There are *no* HET journals in either category.<sup>7</sup> A handful of (mainly) heterodox journals that publish some HET research do make it into the lists: *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 71 (68); *Journal of Economic Issues* 81 (142); *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 138 (171); *Feminist Economics* 145 (35); and *Economics and Philosophy* 146 (86) (impact ranking in parentheses). None of these journals would be seen as principal (or even very attractive) outlets for the work of most HETSA members. Other heterodox journals with some interest in HET are missing altogether.<sup>8</sup> In sum, only three journals that are consistently open to HET feature in the top 100, ranked by impact. Publish anything outside *Feminist Economics*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* or *Economics and Philosophy* and your research will almost certainly be rated as 'not of high quality'. This is also very bad news indeed for those HETSA members currently fortunate enough to work in Serie A institutions, where status and prestige is at stake, not to mention teaching loads, promotion opportunities, access to internal and external research funding, and prospects for study leave.

Third, and crucially, students will come to shun HET like the plague. Why commit yourself to a field which *counts for nothing* in the assessment of (Serie A) research, and which will therefore destroy your career prospects in advance?<sup>9</sup>

What is to be done? First, we could decide that resistance is futile. Serie B will, after all, offer some boltholes for recalcitrant historians of economics, as it has done in the UK and in some of the liberal arts colleges in the United States (at the expense, I believe, of horrific teaching loads). And there will always be mainstream economists who treat HET as their hobby<sup>10</sup> or their retirement project, so that research will never die out altogether; it *is* an interesting thing to dabble in, after all.

Second, if we dislike the prospect of marginalisation or gerontocracy we can take evasive action. As Margaret Schabas famously suggested some years ago, and Roy Weintraub now proposes, historians of economics should move to calmer waters in history of science or philosophy departments (Schabas 1992; Backhouse 2002a; Weintraub 2006). This is probably a good idea for the young and agile, though it is hopeless for the elderly and immobile, like the present writer. In any case, doubts remain (and were forcefully expressed to Weintraub at the Porto ESHET conference in April 2006) as to just how large and how friendly these other tents will turn out to be. Anecdotal evidence is not encouraging. I occasionally consort with sociologists, historians and industrial relations academics at seminars and conferences, and am disconcerted—also secretly rather pleased—to hear how often 'economist' is used as a term of abuse. Barriers to migration may well prove insuperable.<sup>11</sup>

Third, we might stay and fight. There are real problems with the ‘top journals’ lists, and these are becoming increasingly evident. The market for economics journals is highly imperfect, and even the standard bibliometric indices reveal that the ‘best’ (that is, most-cited) paper in a second-tier journal has a much greater impact than (say) the worst four papers in a contemporary issue of the *American Economic Review* (Oswald 2007). And the bibliometric indices themselves are highly misleading, as shown by research commissioned by the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. Outside the laboratory sciences, ISI citations measure only a quite small proportion of all published research, and this is a problem that is almost as serious in economics as it is in political science or history.<sup>12</sup> It is a global problem, but it has particularly serious implications for Australia, since local research is systematically under-represented in international journals (Butler 2006; CHASS 2006)<sup>13</sup>. There are real prospects for unlikely alliances here, though King’s Law must always be borne in mind (‘Just because something is stupid doesn’t mean that it won’t happen’). We certainly do need to investigate the quality criteria that are being used in other disciplines, and urge their adoption in economics. Perhaps we should try to convince our colleagues that economics really is more like history than it is like physics.

Any other ideas?

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## Notes

1 This may be partly strategic: ‘I advise students in het/methodology to find an application as a part of their PhD research if they can, so that they can display expertise beyond het/methodology for when they enter the job market’ (Dow 2006).

2 Flinders, Griffith, La Trobe, Macquarie, Murdoch and Newcastle.

3 There was a brief lapse a few years ago when a dubious outfit based on Norfolk Island slipped under the bar while the NSW government was fast asleep, but this embarrassing oversight seems to have been corrected.

4 In mid-2006 HETSA had 50 individual members in Australia. Of these, 8 were retired and another 9 give private addresses and hence were presumably not in academic employment; 12 worked in the Group of Eight, and will certainly be in Serie A; 6 were in the IRUs and have a fighting chance of making the cut. This leaves 15 in other institutions, with little prospect of avoiding Serie B; several of HETSA’s most active and productive members are in this category.

5 There is no *formal* ‘articles only’ policy in the UK (Backhouse 2006), but informal practices clearly do discriminate harshly against HET material.

6 There is a verbal trap for the unwary here: the ‘impact’ of journal citations is supposed to give higher weight to citations in higher-quality journals; it is thus supposed to indicate impact *within* the profession. In its RQF meaning, ‘impact’ refers to influence on policy makers and public opinion, and is supposed to indicate the impact that a given piece of research has *outside* the profession.

7 *HOPE* may come back into contention following the recent decision by Social Science Citation Index journal to reinstate it (and possibly also to backdate citations).

8 All Austrian journals, along with *Capital and Class*, *Journal of Economic Methodology*, *Journal of Institutional Economics*, *Metroeconomica*, *Review of Political*

*Economy, Review of Radical Political Economics, Review of Social Economy, Science and Society* and many, many more.

9 There is also a longer-term threat, only loosely related to the RQF. This is the replacement of the traditional 100%-dissertation Ph.D. with something akin to the US system based on coursework, with a much shorter and more ‘technical’ (read, mainstream) thesis component. This has already taken place in the UK (Backhouse 2002a). In Australia it would further marginalise Serie B institutions (due both to their lack of reputation and their inability to benefit from economies of scale in postgraduate coursework) and threaten HET research in general. It is loosely related to the research assessment process, with its emphasis on ‘research training’ and on the need for graduate students to acquire ‘research skills’, which include the ability to publish in ‘top’ journals.

10 A term attributed to John Creedy, a hobbyist (it must be said) of some talent.

11 Note that one manoeuvre sometimes contemplated in the UK will not be available to us in Australia. For the RQF Panel 10 will cover ‘Economics, Commerce and Management’, so that a move to assessment by a supposedly softer ‘business subjects’ panel will not be possible here.

12 Historians are of course much more likely to recognise that there is a problem. To cite just one example: a recent scholarly biography of the historian A. J. P. Taylor devotes a lengthy chapter to his books, and another one to his popular writing and TV journalism; there are almost no references to his articles in refereed scholarly journals (Burk 2000).

13 The JCR list has only one Australian journal, the *Economic Record* (ranked 122 by total cites and 145 by impact factor). On this basis almost no-one working on Australian policy issues or using Australian data will find their research counting for anything at all.

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